

Margo Okazawa-Rey
Combahee River Collective
by phone, 20 October 1997

Interviewed prefaced by a quick run through of what all of the questions would be.

K: So how long did you participate in Combahee?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: I was a member for about two years, from the beginning.

K: Do you recall what you would date the beginning from?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Let's see. I met---there was a small group of black women meeting informally in 1975. The winter of 1975. I don't remember exactly which month and I had heard about them through friends of friends. Just kind of word of mouth. We were all in Boston at the time and at the time there was Demita Frazier, Helen Stewart. This was pre-Combahee. Before we got the name and everything.

Contradicts Smith
(Combahee in
Summer 1975)

K: Do you recall if this was after they decided not to be a part of the National Black Feminist Organization or was that kind of up in the air?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: This was kind of up in the air. I think the national conference had just happened and there was some stuff about homophobia and heterosexism that had come up.

K: And did you attend the national conference?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: No.

K: Okay, so this was all in Boston. And you said you came to be involved through word-of-mouth. Do you remember who in particular told you about the group.

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Um... you know, I don't.

K: Okay. What role do you recall playing in the organization? I know it was run as a collective, but did you have any particular skills that you used while you were there?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: What I thought was that I had---the group of people involved at that time were living in Boston, but weren't necessarily connected to things happening in Boston. What I brought was that I had been a social worker, and I was a social worker at the time, so was connected to African American communities through that particular venue. So I had---knew people outside of the women's community, which at that time was primarily white women's community. And then there was us. A couple of Puerto Rican women.

K: So you sort of served to help the group network with other factors? Okay. And did you belong to any other organizations before you were involved with this group?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: I'd been going to some Daughters of Bilitis meetings---this was a few years before then---and not really any political group at that point.

K: Okay, so no other black women's groups or civil rights things.

Margo Okazawa-Rey: No.

K: And were they doing consciousness-raising and things like that in Daughters of Bilitis?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Yeah, it was basically white women and it seemed mostly, y'know, kind of lower middle class women or middle-class women who came to the meetings. And it was this consciousness-

raising about being a lesbian. And then people weren't really talking about race or class really, just lesbians. Y'know, monolithically. And I was pretty frustrated with that and so I actually stopped going after a couple years. Actually it wasn't even that long. It was about a year or less. And then I heard through word-of-mouth about a group of black lesbians and I was thrilled.

K: Okay. Excellent. And so you attended the retreats that happened over the next two years? Black women's retreats?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Yes.

K: Can you tell me how you felt about those or the running of those?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: I actually took care of the logistics for the first one and it was pretty amazing that it happened. But before that the group of us went to the Modern Language Association conference which was held in New York that year. At that point Barbara Smith was a doctoral student in English, so she was connected to MLA and there was a big kind of a confrontation with some of the white women there. I think Florence Howe was one of them. There was another woman there named Nancy Hoffman. Around issues of race. At that meeting we made connections with the women from New York, who eventually became part of the collective. And I think it's important to know, and I'm sure you know this from having talked to a bunch of people, that the collective was pretty loose. Loosely defined and loosely membered.

K: But not just centered in Boston, right?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Right. But it was centered in Boston insofar as Barbara Smith was there.

K: Also, another thing before that: the Combahee River Collective Statement, do you recall having a part in writing the draft of that?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Not actually writing the draft, but definitely all of the ideas we talked about in our discussions came up in the draft.

K: There were some things that I was looking at in the papers, which are at the Lesbian Herstory Archive, and from what I could gather it looked like Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier wrote the initial draft. Would you agree with that?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Yes, that's basically it.

K: Okay, so then you were involved with logistics for the first retreat?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: It was held in Wellesly, Mass.

K: And it looks like there were twenty women who were sent a survey before hand to find out what issues they'd like to discuss?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Oh, I think that was later. I think---because at the first retreat there were only about six or seven or eight of us there. It was very small.

K: Well, let me see if this sounds familiar 'cause I have some things labeled "First retreat". Just talking about what's been done, what's happening now, past black feminist action, some discussion of the statement?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: No, this was before. This was before we even had the name Combahee River Collective and this meeting happened in Wellesly. It was probably in the spring and I can't remember if it's '75 or '76, but I have a photograph of about six of us who were there. And this was before the name Combahee River Collective even came up. And we were talking about what we should name ourselves and one person suggested we should name ourselves "Sienna," which is a particular color, shade of brown. And

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Barbara
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it was actually Barbara who said, "Well, no, that doesn't really say anything about our politics." So then we talked about the major battle that Harriet Tubman fought by the Combahee River, which is in South Carolina and that's how the name happened. There was discussion about names at that retreat.

K: Did you have any discussion about using feminist in the title?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Just---at first there was, you know, Combahee River Collective and it was kind of understood that we were feminist. We were black, we were lesbians, most of us, and I can't remember if we made that explicit at that point. It probably evolved a little bit later. It was all kind of understood.

K: What about as far as being a socialist organization? Did evolve from that first retreat?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Yes, I think that was an ever-evolving conversation, but I think we were all clear that we were socialists.

K: Okay. So what events stand out for you from the time that you were with Combahee?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Definitely that naming conversation, you know, what we would call ourselves and that's when some of the political differences sort of came out among---at least one person in particular. She was more interested in---this is the person who suggested that the name be "Sienna"---I think she was thinking about it, kind of more, psychologically or something, in retrospect. But definitely not as political as we'd wanted. You know, the name sounded nice. It had a nice sound to it. It definitely doesn't have a political edge to it and we were---our politics were pretty sharp, sharply defined or at least we were trying to. And a lot of the conversations dealt with, you know, both dealing with the racism in the white women's community and dealing with heterosexism and homophobia in African American communities.

K: Do you recall any particular actions or forums or workshops you did to deal with those issues? Or was it more based in writing things and disseminating them?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Yes. I think we didn't do much public stuff really overall. I think a lot of our work was done through that collective statement. I think individuals in the group did individual activist projects.

K: So would you consider the organization around the twelve---I don't know if it ended up being 12 or 13--

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Thirteen black women.

K: Right, the women who were killed. Was that something that not all members of the Collective worked on?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: At that point, you know, the membership of the Collective in Boston had really shrunk and essentially it was, you know, Barbara and Beverly and maybe a couple of other people. I was out of it at that point. And Beverly and Barbara came to a couple of meetings, but the main organizing group then was a group called "The Coalition for Women's Safety". And Combahee, or Barbara, came to a couple of meetings, but I think that group was really grassroots group coalition. It involved, you know, human service agencies, the Nation of Islam came to a couple of the meetings, you know, there was really--and it was multi-racial. I think it was one of the first community activist things in Boston that was multi-racial. And Combahee was really only on the---at that point it was basically Barbara and Beverly and they were really on the edge. They were not a significant part of the leadership of that organization.

K: So, the author of the article "Who's Killing Us?," Jaime Grant, mentioned that you had some problems with the article or maybe it was her interpretation of things, so is that part of it?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Yeah. Um-hm.

K: Is it that Combahee was really on the edges, not as central to it?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Right. Combahee was not central to that organizing effort at all. I think Barbara wrote something about the murders, put out a little pamphlet or leaflet. I probably still have it in the archives somewhere, but Combahee wasn't really a part of that in any central way. And I talked to Jaime actually about it this summer, I think, we were at the NWSA conference. And kind of said I had problems with that article because it kind of really marginalized the people who were much more central to the organizing than Barbara Smith.

K: So do you agree that Barbara and Beverly then acted as a bridge between the different communities or do you think that that relationship is over-emphasized in the article?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Yes. Over-emphasized.

K: I wanted to ask a clarifying question because there were lots of papers about the retreats and I'm wondering how the retreats and Combahee are connected. Because I can't get a clear sense of if everyone who went to the retreats was in Combahee or if Combahee was not really established yet.

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Well, and see, this is where the boundaries of who made up Combahee gets really tricky because there were people who came to the retreats, maybe only came once or twice or something, but the membership of the Collective is really—I think "Collective" was probably a misnomer. I think the ideal was to have it a collective, but because it was really loose, first of all, for a collective to be a collective there needs to be real clear definitions of the membership. And, then, clear ideas about decision-making that are consensus and all that. And I think neither of those really existed.

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K: Were there efforts to do that or was it just—you're right it. It is tricky. I'm trying to figure out how to wrap my brain around it.

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Yes, I think if you think about it in the sense that we think of collectives, you're not going to be able to wrap your brain around it, as you said, because conceptually—practically that's not how it worked.

K: Was it more so that whoever was present did the work?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Um-hm. And certain people did certain kinds of work. So, in a way, it was kind of hierarchical in the sense that Barbara was kind of—and this gets really tricky to even talk about this, but Barbara was kind of in the center and she was certainly a driving force and it was hard to know to what extent we kind of acquiesced to her influence and to what extent she really was domineering. You know what I mean? It was tricky. It was a tension there. And I don't know if other people have talked about that. Anyway, who have you talked to already?

K: You're the first person I've talked to. I was scheduled to talk to Sharon Paige Ritchie, but I think she's working on her thesis so she's a little busy right now. And then I wanted to ask you if you had a number for Beverly Smith or Demita Frazier because I would really like to talk to either or both of them. But mainly I've gotten my information from going to the Lesbian Herstory Archives and looking at the papers there.

Margo Okazawa-Rey: And have you talked to Barbara?

K: I spoke with her when I started the project, which was about four or five years ago and she told me where the papers were. But, also, I was reluctant to call her back because she sounded really busy and sort of like she didn't want to talk about it. But I think I'll give it another try, in any case.

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Right. The other person to talk to is Mercedes Tompkins. She lives in Boston. She was one of the original members.

K: Do you have contact information for her?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: I actually do, but I don't have it with me so at home I'll have to email you that.

K: Okay, that would be great.

Margo Okazawa-Rey: And Demita and Beverly should both be listed in the Boston phone book, Cambridge phonebook.

K: Do you know which area they might live in? I've tried to look them up on the Internet and come up with a few D. Fraziers and B. Smiths.

Margo Okazawa-Rey: D. Frazier last I heard was living in Jamaica Plain. And if you talk to Mercedes, she could probably tell you where Demita is. And Beverly, as far as I know, is living in Cambridge or Summerville.

K: Okay, so, thanks. Let's see. So the retreats and Combahee were more loosely connected.

Margo Okazawa-Rey: And I think retreats are places where lots of political discussions happened.

K: Do you recall any of the discussions that occurred there or were there any sorts of ideological disputes that stand out in your mind?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: One of the things was, you know, just talking about lesbianism within the group. You know, who's in the closet, out of the closet, that kind of thing.

K: So were there tensions---you know, demands made of people that they should be out of the closet who weren't?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: I think there was an expectation and a desire for people to say if they're lesbian to kind of make it explicit. The assumption was if you were there, you were lesbian, but sometimes people didn't exactly say. *

K: Do you feel like---were there any issues about class in just the way that issues were talked about? 'Cause from what I've read it seems like things were talked about on a very academic level.

Margo Okazawa-Rey: But I think most of the people who came were educated women and I think it was pretty homogeneous in that way. I think most were all college-educated, if not graduate degrees. Class

K: So I guess then---it sort of changes the way I ask some of my later questions as far as thinking about it as an organization. Do you recall, I guess, working in coalition with other groups of people as Combahee? Or having allies?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: No, I don't. And I was only in it for a couple of years.

K: So do you feel like your participation was mainly around the retreats?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Right. And I actually don't remember them being really kind of activist in the sense of ---as a collective because it was too loosely organized. So individuals were definitely active in different organizations and community projects and stuff. But as a group, unless it happened much later, it certainly didn't happen when I was in it.

K: Do you remember what other sorts of things you were involved with during that time?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: We talked about starting a newspaper and I think that's sort of how the Kitchen Table idea came about later. Initially we were talking about maybe having a newspaper, some kind if published---but it was all kind of academic, you know?

K: Right. But did you personally work with any other organizations between the retreats?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: No.

K: 'Cause I was trying to figure out how do you feel like your time spent with Combahee or in the retreats might have influenced your other work that you were doing?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: I think they were pretty separate actually. Most of my political work at that point was through human services stuff in Roxbury and Dorchester, which are predominately African American communities, and the Combahee retreats were places where—events I went to to learn, but they weren't sort of activist. It was definitely political. I learned a lot.

K: What are some of the things you feel like you learned there?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: One of the things, and it's still very fundamental to my politics, is kind of the intersections of oppression and I think we sort of talked about "triple jeopardy" or something, but I certainly developed more kind of a comprehensive analysis since then. But it's been the foundation of my politics. And having an anti-imperialist/socialist analysis, I think, was really radical in the women's community 'cause they were still talking about sexuality/sexual orientation and a lot of the women didn't have an anti-imperialist/anti-capitalist analysis. I think we did. I mean, obviously, our statement shows we did. ✓

K: Right. So what do you feel like Combahee accomplished. Or even, what do you feel like the retreats accomplished just on a broader level?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: I think it kind of created the base line for thinking about black feminism, radical black feminism. And by radical feminism, I'm not talking the old-style radical feminism of lesbian separatists, but a feminism that is radical: anti-imperialist, socialist, and is made up of black women—black lesbians in particular. And it kind of made us really visible and our politics was complex. *

K: That's interesting that you consider visibility a part of being radical. I think that's very key. So you I guess left the organizations or you stopped going to the retreats after about two years. Do you remember why you did that?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Yeah, and this is probably something you shouldn't write in your paper [K: Okay.], but I'd been involved with Barbara Smith for a short time, but because our relationship ended and I didn't treat her very well, I got kicked out and my friend, Mercedes, also got kicked out because she was my good friend. So we were kind of ousted from the group because the Collective revolved a lot around Barbara. She wielded a lot of power.

K: So did you feel like that was something that was instigated by her or it was a more protective thing on behalf of the group?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: I would say it's both.

K: Okay. Well---

Margo Okazawa-Rey: And I think the lack of collectivity and lack of mechanisms about decision-making left no room to work things out. And it was messy, you know? But there was no mechanism to work it out. And since then Barbara and I are friends and stuff now, but at the time it was pretty intense. lack of collectivity

K: And have you talked about that? How it affected the group or did you come to these conclusions about it not really being a collective on your own? Or was it in conversation with other people?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: I think it was in conversation with other people. And my friend was kicked out, you know, just guilt by association.

K: So why do you think either that the retreats stopped or that Combahee doesn't exist anymore?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Mostly interpersonal conflicts. ^{see email} [email her to elaborate]

K: So things that went on even after you left the organization---interpersonally?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: I think it got more intense, from what I understand.

K: And not necessarily political?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Right.

K: Okay. Let's see. Just for future reference, do you have any Combahee documentation or articles---you mentioned a photo---or correspondence that you would be willing to let me see if I were to be in San Francisco.

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Yeah, I have a photograph taken of us at our first retreat.

K: Is there anything you'd like to add about your experience in Combahee?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Yeah, it fundamentally changed my politics. I just finished putting together an intro to women's studies textbook, a text reader, and we definitely included that statement in the section on theory. Reading the page proofs, we read everything out loud and that piece really, I think, is timeless. It really is. And we were all very young. I think the oldest of us was like twenty-seven or something.

K: How old were you during that time?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Let's see. I was about twenty-six. And I think the youngest member was like twenty, twenty-one.

K: Yeah, it's intimidating for those of us who are twenty-six now to read that and think about that. What's name of the reader, by the way?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: *Women's Lives: Multicultural Perspectives* and it's coming out in December.

K: Who's the publisher?

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Mayfield. [more talk about the explicit anti-capitalist/anti-imperialist, activist perspective]